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British Defence Issues Are Far from Surface Deep or a Modern Phenomenon.

British defence is never far from criticism and short-term analysis in recent years. However, the problems being experienced are far from the daily surface issues that encourage reactionary excitement from military thinkers, the media and commentators. The reality is that the problems across the full spectrum of British defence is not just the platitudes, nostalgia and lacklustre attitudes of politics and the British public towards defence expenditure but a far more profound and ingrained set of issues. These issues, problems and challenges, some rooted in centuries of debate, have been passed from one government and one generation to the next. Amplified by complex, varying influences and factors in the post Second World War environment are not entirely a surprise to anyone educated in the long and often controversial debate that has gripped British defence and strategic thinking in the past two centuries. Although this is often overlooked by the modern obsession with technobabble and the short-sightedness of the keyboard warrior mob it indicates that these complex, long narrative issues are more than conveniently swept under the carpet and little understood.

The narrative of British defence can be broken first and foremost into two clear segments, pre defence unification [the 1960s] and the service ministry era. Essentially anything covering the Second World War and before. The entanglement of issues from either of these phases is so complicated and intense, that although some claim that Britain has or has to move on from nostalgia they fail to grasp how integrated with century-old debates and issues defence is. The nightmare of anyone concerned about British defence is to understand that the modern politician or civil servant has neither the inclination or education or understand where, how and why these issues and problems come from let alone what they mean. Although modern defence maybe partially tempted to avoid being accused of running like a museum, since the creation of the U.K. Ministry of Defence one 'business as standard' ethos can be found; 'well that's how it's always been done' even if on the surface it appears change and reform as occurred. The cultural environment can easily outlast reform when there is a will to maintain it while at the same time smashing apart the value of some aspects of institutional coherence. Probably one of the most dangerous institutional cultures to exist in any defence establishment is to abuse knowledge of the past. The irony is to understand that to solve the future defence requires some study of the past, pre-Ministry of Defence. Although the service ministry's of old such as the British Admiralty or War Office were not without faults and often institutionally became stuck in a certain way of thinking, but they were far from afraid of asking tough conceptual, theoretical and strategic questions that needed public airing. Although 'jointness' has come with great advantages in some regards the defence culture has often enhanced British cultural attitudes towards 'not rocking the boat' with anyone or anything. This has been useful to not only decision makers but some in the military who want to protect certain misplaced ideology or political methods. Long gone are the levers of change that those in defence had to change direction and this has resulted in the relative difficulties they now experience. All of this coming after multiple defence reforms and changes which as Admiral Chatfield warned in the late 1930s 'will simply result in the treasury and politician having so much power that strategic driven and any sense of defence will be pointless where the Royal Navy will be barely effective or efficient and the rest of defence nothing more than useless'. British influence has waned as it has reduced its hard power in favour for soft power where despite all attempts to

stop falling into the abyss of national irrelevancy, Britain's new aircraft carriers are carrying the weight of what little hard impact and influence the nation possesses.

For many the often call for a cash injection to defence would solve its problems all in one neat act, ensuring Tier 1 capabilities and compatibility with Britain's closest ally, the United States. If only resolving British defence were that simple. It would be a functional starting block to increase spending to cover some strategically driven procurement plans, but British defence is probably as equally in need of more cash as it is a hard reboot. Instead, the British defence debate is a lot of noise, technobabble and keyboard warrior driven where finding quality strategic debate is rarely to be found. The British attitude to civility over and in defence rather than asking tough questions, all in the aid to avoid divisions has done little but intensify hidden service rivalry and the influence of the treasury. Ploughing it further into the troubles that are now so sorely seen.

In the U.K. few want to debate strategy as it reopens the hardest two questions of all in Britain's past, current and future defence policy; maritime [aka global] or continental and do they need three armed services? In reality, the latter question could be disregarded if all the services were to row in the same direction. The bitter century of debate between the Royal Air Force and Royal Navy could be ended if both were rowing to the same strategy. Elsewhere the British Army needs to stop pushing an obsession with being placed on the German Rhine or consistent conflict and war as the only way for the future. One strategy presented to the decision maker or treasury would probably result in a far leaner, efficient, effective and funded defence where few can match the British Armed Forces and its maritime focused strategy. Naval historian and theorist Julian Corbett was keen to remind the military in the First World War that the ultimate decision-makers did not need to know the 'in's and outs' of it but that a strategy and plan were in place and history demonstrates confidence that it can work for Britain. This was the best tactic to get decision makers on board with the military advice and historical experience and for them to stop tinkering in the affairs of defence, which few of them understood and even less knew how to manage and budget. British strategy when it had been highly successful in the centuries prior had been more about fighting around the edges, quality services and pin point application of strategy and tactics than messy involvement or presence in extended land and air campaigns. Unfortunately, Corbett's warnings would go unheeded, and the unification of defence purely resulted in more power to the treasury and centre. Intelligent and scholarly thinking would be ejected from the orbit of decision makers to where the consistently revolving door of defence secretaries, treasury plans and joint doctrines was nothing more than a huge flag to welcome in two attitudes, the chaos of 'doing nothing' and defence budget 'salami slicing' which had little intellectual thought behind it and often resulting in British defence being caught off guard. You only have to look at events over the past thirty-five years that defence has become expensive because of the lack of debate and strategy and too many 'near run things'. Pushing off decisions, cutting superior capabilities and devaluing experience only for short-term political expediency has, in the end, cost future governments and defence more than if kept in the first place. Modern defence and unification on both sides of the Atlantic are commonly in short-term circles where power transferred to the centre has done nothing but to harass the centre and military while stripping too much control from those who protect and provide insurance for long-term value and strategy.

With global tensions rising and new and old challenges, for this would not be the first time in history that an array of problems are combined into what appears akin to decline into continual conflict and war, which has come with its own problems and issues, the British are again looking at defence. U.S. Defence Secretary Mattis writing in June of 2018 to the British

defence secretary voicing his concerns over military expenditure and the outcome of U.K. Defence Modernising, it led to a foray of commentary where it appeared both the British Prime Minister and Treasury have not changed their approach to defence. It highlights again, that since the 1960s British defence has been about rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship while the hard choices and truth row away towards the setting sun.

The permutation of rigidity, 'strategyless' and lacklustre defence debates of the past sixty years have come to a point where either events overtake the dialogue, or a strategic shock will hit the British so hard, Brexit aside, that they will have no choice but to fight and think on terms not defined of their own. This destroys centuries of British experience and strength where the sea, was used to stack the odds in British favour. The U.K. having squandered what time they have had to reform defence and that the often-devoid study of their own and foreign history will inevitably and ultimately backfire on the British. British defence often acts like a self-created museum, where on the one hand they pretend to be modern and forward-looking but avoiding admitting they are deeply lost in the misinterpretation, misinformation and manipulation of old unanswered questions and debates. The similarities to history are startling and worrying many military thinkers, the late 1930s where the Royal Air Force was misconfigured, the British Army short on personnel and the Royal Navy lacked the investment to truly command the seas to protect Britain's very survival. Today the situation is similar, the British nuclear deterrence has been a certain line of defence but often under threat from misguided thinking while the significantly depleted Royal Navy exists on the back of an increasingly shaky 'can do attitude' while the Army and Airforce have little operational stamina left within them.

British defence has finally headed towards a crunch point where the build-up of underinvestment, the platitudes of niceties and the ejection of intellectual thought has broken the back of defence. Chaos may be a good thing if the past culture of conviction of the service ministries and previous chiefs of staff still existed to turn it into opportunity, but instead, Britain will probably find another carefully worded answer or delicately managed set of accountants push issues yet again in the future. How long can this be sustained is the question?

Therefore the U.S. Defence Secretary is wholly correct to raise concerns, they are well placed and founded. Early 20th century British Admiral and reformer John Fisher famously used the slogan 'sack the lot' for he had been on the end of seeing and experiencing the paralysis of indecision and the abandonment of strategy in favour of political expediency, service rivalry and treasury control. Perhaps today the best answer today is to do exactly what Fisher recommend: 'sack the lot' and reboot British defence with strategy first culture and an institutional policy where Britain 'out thinks' challenges rather than whatever the status quo in the U.K. MoD is or the direction of the political winds at the moment demands.

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